

Takoma Park festival's a stop for Democrats running for Montgomery's at-large seats

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The food was chickpeas and chicken. The soundtrack was reggae, acoustic guitars and the shaking shin bells of old English dancers. And the politics was everywhere.

A women's gun group set up in a tent beside Peace Action Montgomery, and a man walked near an anti-death penalty booth carrying a yellow sign that read: "Don't Save the Bay, Save Babies Instead."

In an afternoon that went from spitting rain to patches of blue, on the last weekend day to troll for votes before Tuesday's primary, there was no place a slew of leading Democrats running for at-large spots on the Montgomery County Council would rather be Sunday than at the 33rd staging of a folk festival in diverse, but deeply liberal, Takoma Park.

"These are my people," said Hans Riemer, one of the top challengers in the at-large council race. He walked a couple of blocks from his Silver Spring home to Takoma Park Middle School and hit up voters from Bethesda to Germantown. "A lot of politicians go to church on weekends before an election. This is comparable."

Incumbent George L. Leventhal was there, coming in for a handshake wherever one might be possible. He even tried a guy pushing a wheelbarrow full of trash with gloved hands. On Saturday, he had been at a fire station ribbon-cutting in Germantown, the Silver Spring Jazz Festival and a fundraiser for U.S. Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski (D) in Potomac -- and those were fewer than half his stops.

"It's mostly to work out my own nervous energy. Four years ago, I got 52,000 votes. There's nothing I can do to meet that many people," Leventhal said. "I'm shaking hands here. Why not? What else am I going to do?"

'Vote For ME'

Incumbent Marc Elrich, a former fifth-grade teacher sporting a "Vote For ME" sticker, was on the Takoma Park City Council for 19 years and spent time at Sunday's festival schmoozing with former students and connecting with longtime supporters.

"This is a lot like home base," Elrich said. He was also reminded, even at the height of his reelection bid, of the ever-present task of constituent problem solving.

"It just burns me up," fumed Takoma Park Mayor Bruce Williams, a friend and campaign supporter. "They put a new traffic light on Cherry Hill Road. It blocks a chunk of sidewalk."

"These are the frustrating things I hear about," said Elrich, who's looking into who's responsible and how to fix it.

Elrich -- who gave his son Joshua the middle name Che -- came into office four years ago to askance looks from many in business. While he still has critics, this time around he has endorsements from a Realtors group and the Bethesda Chamber of Commerce.

"I come out of different era," Elrich said. "I wanted to change my dynamic with the business community. I know people made assumptions about what I would be like and what I would do."

Elrich has maintained a low-key approach that lacks some of the pomposity that can creep into politics. Asked what the biggest consequence would be if the top challengers manage to nudge a number of incumbents off the dais, Elrich responds: "Frankly, almost nothing."

"There's almost no difference, which is what you could tell from the debates. There's literally no difference between people on most of what we do," he said.

"Some of us are more experienced than the challengers. Experience is sometimes a good thing. But I don't make as much of it as other people," Elrich added. "Four years ago, I was new to the council. I would have taken umbrage to somebody saying, 'You need experience.' "

Can't lose

Some enjoying the afternoon echoed that sentiment, saying they are still weighing who to support but are satisfied with the field.

"It's not like there's a deficit of good people running," said Takoma Park resident Victor Thuronyi after making his way through the series of grapevine steps and claps that drive an Israeli folk dance known as Mayim.

"There are basically five people who are quite good, but you can only vote for four," Thuronyi said.

He wouldn't share his preferences, other than to say that the local Sierra Club endorsements hold weight for him. In the at-large race those were: Elrich, Riemer and incumbent Duchy Trachtenberg.

But Peter Jones, who joined with the D.C. Labor Chorus to sing "Solidarity Forever," said he tends to put more faith in picks of the Montgomery County Education Association, which represents thousands of teachers and distributes distinctive red apple-shaped sample ballots to county voters.

"I generally trust their judgment on things unless I have something else to go by," he said.

Jones is the business manager for Maryland Citizens Against State Executions, the kind of liberal activist who can be counted on to vote in a primary. He grew up in Montgomery, where he says the culture accepts the need to compensate teachers.

"There are some labor unions who will lean a little bit more toward just looking out for their membership. Ultimately, that's the union's job. But it can be self-defeating," Jones said. But he said he believes that the teachers union chooses responsible leaders. "You don't get a good education system unless you pay for that."

In the at-large race, the education association chose Elrich, Leventhal, Riemer and challenger Becky Wagner, who was being introduced around the festivities by a friend.

Jones said he was somewhat torn because that excluded Trachtenberg, who also showed up in Takoma Park. He considers her a voice for women but thought her campaign has been too in-your-face about taking on public employee unions.

"I've been an early voice for a more disciplined approach around our budget," she said. "I haven't gotten any pushback from voters about the Apple ballot."

The teachers also shut out County Council President Nancy Floreen, who presided over this year's difficult budget season, including a slight cut to a schools budget that has seen swift growth over many years.

Floreen snapped a picture of her daughter and Gov. Martin O'Malley, who also campaigned at the folk festival.

"I've supported the teachers. But I've always asked hard questions, and perhaps they don't like that," Floreen said. "They also have an underlying very progressive agenda, and I'm more middle of the road."

Also at the folk festival was candidate Jane de Winter, an economist. Fred Evans, a former principal, and Raj Narayanan, executive director of the Life in Yoga Institute, are also running.